

WARREN
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VAMPI
#53

AUG. 1976

VAMPIRELLA

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SEIZED BY DESPERADO ASSASSINS,
VAMPIRELLA MUST AID THEM...
OR BECOME AN ALIEN TIME BOMB!
"THE HUMAN MARKETPLACE!"





OUR COVER

VAMPIRELLA has joined a band of slave traders as a slave! No doubt our courageous heroine will bring a high price as would this phenomenal painting by Enrich!

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VAMPIRELLA

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VAMPIRELLA

IT IS A DRY, SUFFOCATING HEAT THAT BLANKETS THE MEXICAN BORDER, MAKING DRIVING DIFFICULT AND COMFORT IMPOSSIBLE. AN OPPRESSIVE HEAT THAT DEHYDRATES THE SKIN AND TURNS FLESH TO LEATHER.

PENDRAGON SMILES AS THEY APPROACH THE U.S. CUSTOMS CHECKPOINT. TO HIM, IT IS A SIGN THAT THEY ARE ALMOST HOME, A WELCOME REASSURANCE THAT RELIEF IS FORTHCOMING.



VAMPIRELLA DOES NOT SMILE. APPREHENSION TIGHTENS THE MUSCLES OF HER STOMACH, FOR SHE KNOWS SHE MUST AGAIN PRESENT HER FORGED PASSPORT TO THE SCRUTINY OF A CUSTOMS INSPECTOR. HER LUCK HAS BEEN GOOD SO FAR...

...BUT GOOD LUCK IS AN ELUSIVE THING THAT HAS A WAY OF DESERTING ONE AT MOST INOPPORTUNE TIMES!

THE Human market place

THEY STOP, SPENDING LONG ENDLESS **MINUTES** IN THE TINY SHACK. THE HEAT AND TENSION **BUILD**, CREATING A SURREAL **NIGHTMARE**, A DISTORTED LANDSCAPE UNLEASHED FROM **CALIGARI'S CABINET**....!

WHEN SAM FIRST **CONTACTED** US, WE ATTEMPTED TO LOOK INTO YOUR **BACKGROUND**...ONLY TO FIND THAT YOU HAVE NONE! NO **BIRTH CERTIFICATE**, NO FINGER-**PRINTS**...**NOTHING!**

SILENCE. PSYCHOLOGICALLY, SHE TRIED TO **PREPARE** HERSELF FOR THIS MOMENT MANY TIMES, BUT NOW THAT IT HAS **COME** THERE ARE NO WORDS.

PERHAPS THIS IS NOT THE PROPER PLACE TO **TALK**. I WANT YOU BOTH TO COME WITH **ME**....!

THIS IS THE **ONE**, MR. SPECTRUM. I SPOTTED HER **PHONY PASSPORT** WHEN SHE FIRST CROSSED INTO **MEXICO**. I THOUGHT YOUR DEPARTMENT MIGHT BE **INTERESTED** IN HER....

WE ARE **VERY** INTERESTED, MS. DURRELL... OR **WHATEVER** YOUR NAME IS.

WE WOULD LIKE TO KNOW **WHY**.

AND SO, A FEW MINUTES LATER...



FROM VARIOUS NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS OF YOUR **EXPLOITS**, IT APPEARS YOU ARE SOMEWHAT OF AN **ADVENTURESS**. RIGHT NOW, WE HAVE **NEED** OF SOMEONE WITH YOUR **QUALIFICATIONS**.

I WORK FOR AN **AGENCY** SIMILAR TO THE **CIA**. AT PRESENT, WE ARE INVOLVED IN A **DELICATE AFFAIR** WHICH REQUIRES SPECIAL **CAPABILITIES**.

TO PUT IT **BRIEFLY** AND **BLUNTLY**, MS. DURRELL, WE WANT YOU TO INFILTRATE A **WHITE SLAVERY RING**!

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, THE LIGHTS OF **SAN FRANCISCO HARBOR** CAST GLIMMERING, WAVERING **REFLECTIONS** OVER THE CHOPPY PACIFIC WATERS. BUT VAMPIRELLA IS UN-AWARE OF ITS **BEAUTY**, AS...

I CAN'T DISPEL THE FEELING THAT THERE'S **MORE** TO THIS AFFAIR THAN SPECTRUM HAS **TOLD** ME!

IT ALL SEEMED RATHER **CLEAR** TO ME. **SIX WOMEN** HAVE **DIS-APPEARED** FROM THE BAY AREA RECENTLY, ALL AFTER LEAVING THE **SILVER STEP TAVERN**.

SPECTRUM WANTS YOU TO **GO THERE** AND MAKE YOURSELF **VISIBLE**, HOPING THAT THE KID-NAPPERS WILL MAKE A MOVE TOWARDS YOU!

I'M AFRAID YOU'RE **RIGHT**, PENDY. BUT TO SPECTRUM, I'M ONLY A **TOOL**. HE DOESN'T GIVE A DAMN WHAT HAPPENS TO **ME**, ONLY HIS **MISSION**. I'M NOT USED TO DEALING WITH MEN LIKE THAT.

AND I'M NOT AFRAID TO ADMIT, I FEEL VERY **WEAK** AND **SCARED** RIGHT NOW.

AS SHE **ENTERS** THE **SILVER STEP TAVERN**. THE ROOM REEKS OF **ALCOHOL** AND THE SALT-STAINED CLOTHES OF THE SEAMEN WHO **DRINK** IT.

ODD, I THOUGHT I'D FACE EVERY SORT OF HORROR **IMAGINABLE**, AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER. BUT **THIS** SCARES ME MORE THAN ANY OF THEM...!

SHE FEELS THE HOT, HUNGRY STARES, MENTALLY STRIPPING HER DIGNITY ALONG WITH HER CLOTHES. THERE IS ONLY THE THINNEST VENEER OF CIVILIZATION HERE, AND SHE CAN ALMOST FEEL THE COARSE, CALLOUSED HANDS GROPING TO TOUCH HER.

FOR THE PRESENT, THEY ARE CONTENT TO FANTASIZE, BUT SHE KNOWS IN A MOMENT, THAT RESPITE WILL END.



SHE TRIES TO SUPPRESS THE WAVE OF NAUSEA AND DISGUST THAT WELLS WITHIN HER.

YES, I'VE JUST ARRIVED IN TOWN AND--

GOOD! THAT MEANS YOU AIN'T GOT NO BOYFRIEND WAITIN' FER YA...OR NO FAMILY. IT MEANS YOU GOT NO PLACE TO GO HOME TO TONIGHT...!



I WISH I KNEW WHY HE'S PROBING FOR INFORMATION. DOES HE JUST WANT TO TAKE ME HOME FOR THE NIGHT, OR IS HE CONSIDERING ME A POTENTIAL VICTIM?



SO, A FEW MINUTES LATER...

IF IT TURNS OUT HE IS INNOCENT, I SHOULD BE ABLE TO HANDLE HIM ONE-TO-ONE. IF NOT, I'M PROBABLY WALKING RIGHT INTO THE DRAGON'S MOUTH!



FINE! MAYBE YOU'LL STAY QUIET WHILE WE CHLOROFORM YOU! CAP'N SILVER'S GONNA BE MIGHTY PLEASED WITH THIS SPECIMEN...!



THE OVERPOWERING ODOR OF THE CHLOROFORM ASSAULTS HER SENSES AND SHE YIELDS TO IT. IT'S BETTER THIS WAY, SHE THINKS, JUST BEFORE THE BLACKNESS SUBDUES HER.

IT IS AN OLD SHIP TO WHICH VAMPIRELLA IS CARRIED, ONE THAT HAS SEEN MANY VOYAGES, AND WHOSE WEATHERED HULL IS UNLIKELY TO SUSTAIN MANY MORE. BUT SHE IS UNAWARE OF THAT, OR ANY OTHER FACT.

WE'D BETTER GET HER OUT TO THE ISLAND IMMEDIATELY. CAP'N SILVER'LL WANT TO START ON THIS ONE RIGHT AWAY...!



WITHIN THE HOLD, CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNS TO VAMPIRELLA. SHE CLOSES HER MIND TO PANIC AND SEARCHES HER MAKESHIFT PRISON THOROUGHLY AND EXPEDITIOUSLY.

SPECTRUM WANTED ME TO FIND WHO WAS BEHIND THIS WHITE SLAVERY OPERATION.



THE BOAT DOCKS, AND THE MEN COME FOR HER. GRUFFLY, THEIR HARD HANDS CLUTCH HER TANNED FLESH AND SHOVE HER ASHORE...



SHE DIDN'T HEAR THE RUSTLE OF FOOTSTEPS OVER THEIR OWN. SHE DIDN'T HEAR THE MURMERED SIGH OF APPROVAL FROM THE PARCHED LIPS OF CAPTAIN SILVER... HIS SUDEN APPEARANCE WAS, IN EVERY RESPECT, A TOTAL SURPRISE.





SHE IS A WOMAN NOT USED TO CAPTIVITY. THE HOURS PASS SLOWLY, AND AS DARKNESS SETS IN, SHE BECOMES A TRAPPED ANIMAL, NERVOUSLY STALKING THE CONFINES OF HER CAGE.

CAN'T CONTROL IT ANY LONGER...MUST... FEED...!

A TRAPPED, HUNGRY ANIMAL.

ULTIMATELY, SHE **SUCCUMBS** TO HER PERVERSIVE LUST...ONLY TO DISCOVER THAT THINGS ARE NOT AS THEY SEEM!

WHAT?!
THEY'RE BLOODLESS!

THESE ARE NOT WOMEN...THEY'RE CYBERNAUTS!

DIDN'T WANT TO TAKE THE CHANCE THAT THE GUARDS WOULD RETURN AND FIND ME MISSING...BUT NOW IT LOOKS LIKE I'LL HAVE TO.

CAN'T SAY I'M SORRY. HORATIO IS A MUCH MORE DESERVING VICTIM ANYWAY.

THE FEAR AND THE SELF-DOUBTS ARE DISPELLED. SHE IS NO LONGER THE PREY, SHE IS THE HUNTER...AND WHATEVER HAPPENS, IT IS SHE WHO HAS TAKEN CONTROL OF HER FATE.

HOW DID YOU--?

I'LL ASK THE QUESTIONS...AND WE'LL START BY LEARNING MORE ABOUT CAPTAIN SILVER'S PROCESS. IT'S MORE THAN MERE BRAINWASHING, ISN'T IT?

A LIGHT...IT LOOKS LIKE HORATIO'S ROOM!

YES. IT AFFECTS THE WOMEN'S BODIES AS WELL AS THEIR MINDS. SILVER GIVES THEM CHEMICAL INJECTIONS WHICH ALTER THEIR METABOLISM FROM FLESH AND BLOOD TO SYNTHETIC PLASTIC.

IT IS THE MEANS BY WHICH CAP'N SILVER INTENDS TO KILL OFF THE WORLD'S LEADERS. YOU SEE, EACH OF THE GIRLS WILL BE DELIVERED TO THEIR RESPECTIVE MASTERS THE SAME DAY...

NATURALLY, THAT NIGHT, THE MEN WILL WANT TO...EH, CONSUMMATE THE AGREEMENT...

SO THE GIRLS' BODIES ARE TREATED IN SUCH A WAY THAT WHEN THEIR MASTER'S REACH SATISFACTION, A CHEMICAL REACTION WILL TAKE PLACE, CAUSING AN EXPLOSION!

GOOD GOD!

YOU'VE BEEN VERY HELPFUL, HORATIO... NOW YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO HELP ME IN ANOTHER WAY...

...THOUGH I'M AFRAID THIS FAVOR IS NOT QUITE AS PAINLESS!

HORATIO'S DYING SCREAM DID NOT GO UNNOTICED, MS. DURRELL. ACTUALLY, I'M GRATEFUL FOR WHAT YOU'VE DONE...

IT HAS ALLOWED ME TO SEE A SIDE OF YOUR PERSONALITY I WOULD NEVER SUSPECTED.

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I WON'T DO THE SAME THING TO YOU NEXT?

AARRGH!

THEN YOU SHOULD DEEM IT NECESSARY. YOU HAVE ONE SHOT, CAPTAIN SILVER...

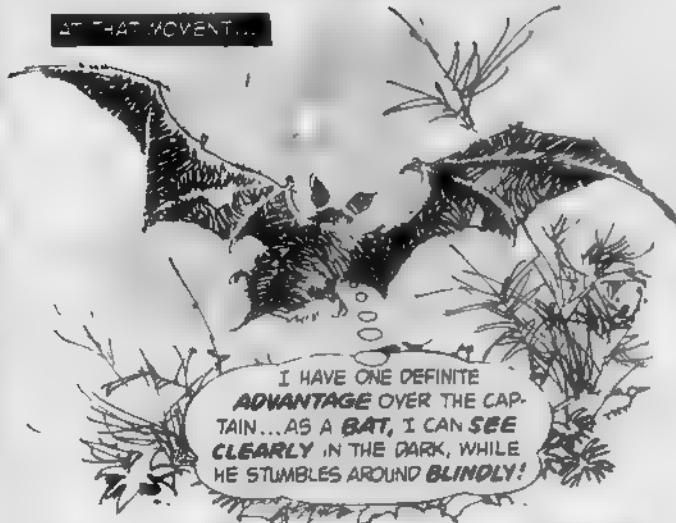
YOU'D BETTER PRAY THAT IT FINDS ITS MARK, BECAUSE EITHER WAY, ONLY ONE OF US IS LEAVING THIS ROOM!

SHE HEARS THE DECEPTIVELY QUIET CLICK OF THE TRIGGER, AND FEELS THE SUDDEN RUSH OF AIR AS THE DEADLY PROJECTILE SOARS PAST HER HEAD. A WHISPERED SIGH OF RELIEF ESCAPES HER LIPS...

FEAR PUMPS ADRENALIN INTO THE CAPTAIN'S SYSTEM, PERMITTING HIM TO MOVE WITH UNEXPECTED SWIFTNESS.

...THEN SHE SWOOPS FORWARD WITH ASSURED, ARIEL GRACE.

LOCKED! BUT HE WON'T GET FAR... I CAN EXIT THE SAME WAY I ENTERED!



SHE WATCHES, HER SOUL SWELLING WITH GUILT AND HORROR. INSTINCTIVELY, SHE WANTS TO REACH OUT AND END THIS MAN'S SUFFERING.

BUT THERE ARE OTHER THINGS TO BE CONSIDERED. THE MAN BEFORE HER IS AN EVIL, CRUEL MAN.

THE MOMENT FOR CHOICE PASSES, NOW THERE IS ONLY TIME FOR REGRET. SHE FINDS SHE CANNOT HOLD BACK THE TEARS FOR INNOCENCE LOST....



SUDDENLY... FROM THE PINDON...



DEAD... ALL OF THEM! THE SAILORS MUST HAVE TRIED TO RAPe THE CYBERNAUTS!



A FEW DAYS LATER, ON THE MAINLAND...

YOU'VE DONE US ALL A GREAT SERVICE, MS. DURRELL. NOW I'M GOING TO FULFILL MY PART OF THE DEAL.



I STILL CAN'T FORGET THAT I LET CAPTA.N SILVER DIE TO PRESERVE MY SECRET. HOW DO I EASE MY MIND OF THAT?

IT'S SOMETHING YOU'LL HAVE TO LEARN TO LIVE WITH, AND I DON'T ENVY YOU THAT TASK.



I HOPE MR. SPECTRUM IS SATISFIED...!

HERE IS A FULLY LEGAL BIRTH CERTIFICATE AND PASSPORT, NOT TO MENTION CITIZENSHIP PAPERS, ISSUED TO VALERIE DURRELL... NO OTHER QUESTIONS ASKED!

BUT AS FOR ME, I'LL STICK TO THE OLD ADAGE ...FORGIVE AND FORGET.

OPIUM IS THE RELIGION OF THE PEOPLE

I LIT ANOTHER CIGARETTE, JUST AS WE HIT THE TRESTLE-BRIDGE OUTSIDE MYSTIC, CONNECTICUT. IT WOULD BE A GOOD THREE HOURS BEFORE THE TRAIN MADE NEW YORK CITY, BUT ALREADY I WAS GETTING RESTLESS.



OUTSIDE, THE HARBOR LIGHTS SHONE LIKE *MICE-EYES* IN THE DISTANCE... A CANDLEMAS PROCESSION DOWN THE FARAWAY HILLSIDE OVERLOOKING THE BASIN OF THE VALLEY. THEY, ALONG WITH THE STEADY STACCATO *ANYTHM* OF THE COACH, SHOULD HAVE LULLED ME TO SLEEP. THEY DIDN'T.

I WAS ON MY WAY TO A CITY THAT HAD NEVER KNOWN A CHORUS OF CRICKETS, NOR THE PUNGENT SMELL OF FRESH-SHORN WHEAT CARRIED BY A CRISP MORNING BREEZE. THE NOTION DEPRESSED ME.

BUT I REMEMBERED, AS A KID, A FACELESS VOICE ON THE TV SAYING THAT THERE WERE EIGHT MILLION STORIES IN THE NAKED CITY. TONIGHT I WAS LOOKING FOR ONE OF THEM... THE ONE THAT KILLED MY SISTER.

THE ONE THEY CALLED THE ABDOMINABLE SNOWMAN.

HE WASN'T TWELVE FEET TALL NOR COVERED WITH WHITE SHAGGY FUR, BUT HE WAS A MONSTER... THE KIND THAT FEEDS HEROIN TO SEVENTEEN YEAR OLD RUNAWAYS.

SOME CLEVER JUNKIE PROBABLY THOUGHT UP THE NICKNAME... "HEY, I NEED SOME SNOW, MAN!" THE SNOWMAN'S REAL NAME WAS CHARLIE COOKE.

NOT THAT I BLAMED HIM PERSONALLY FOR WHAT HAPPENED TO SUGIE. IT TAKES TWO TO MAKE AN ADDICT, SO AT LEAST HALF THE BLAME FALLS ON MY KID SISTER.



I WAS GOING TO KILL HIM.

B. BOUDREAU



BUT YOU DON'T SPARE THE TARANTULA JUST BECAUSE IT BEARS NO PERSONAL *MALICE* WHEN IT BITES.

STORY: GERRY BOUDREAU/ART: AURALEON

NURSING MY BOURBON -AND- WATER, I CONSIDERED HOW I WOULD KILL HIM. IT MUST BE SLOW, EXQUISITELY PAINFUL. I DECIDED... LIKE THE TWO-YEAR DISINTEGRATION OF A HEALTHY, VIBRANT TEENYBOMPER INTO A WOUNDED ANIMAL.



I LEARNED MOST OF THE DETAILS FROM A DIARY THE POLICE FOUND. THE ENTRIES WERE OFTEN INCOHERENT AND OUT OF SEQUENCE, BUT THEY TOLD HOW COOKE HAD TAKEN HER IN OFF THE STREETS, PRIMED HER WITH KINDNESS, AND HANDED HER A SPIKE.

SHE LIVED WITH HIM SIX MONTHS AFTERWARDS, TILL HE FOUND ANOTHER YOUNG RUNAWAY. STALE AND OVERUSED, SUSIE WAS THROWN OUT OF THE APARTMENT. THE ONLY TIME SHE SAW THE SNOWMAN AFTER THAT WAS WHEN SHE NEEDED A CONNECTION.



ONCE, ABOUT A YEAR AGO, SHE WAS CONVINCED THAT THE DEVIL HAD TAKEN POSSESSION OF HER SOUL, SO SHE TRIED TO BURN IT OUT...



...WITH ACID!

TILL THEN SHE'D SUPPORTED HER HABIT BY LEAVING HER BODY TO ANYTHING WARM & WALKER.



BUT THERE ISN'T MUCH OF A MARKET FOR DISFIGURED HOOKERS... SO SHE FOUND OTHERS WAYS.



THOUGH THEY COULDN'T PROVE IT, POLICE WERE CERTAIN SHE'D SHOT AND KILLED AN OLD STOREKEEPER IN CHELSEA A FEW MONTHS BACK... FOR SIXTEEN DOLLARS AND CHANGE.



LAST WEEK, A JANITOR FOUND HER, IN THE BALCONY OF A FORTY SECOND STREET MOVIEHOUSE, AFTER EVERYONE ELSE HAD GONE. SHE'D OWNED HALFWAY THROUGH "THE DEVIL IN MISS JONES."



NO ONE HAD NOTICED.

THE POLICE MADE A ROUTINE SEARCH FOR THE SNOWMAN, THEN DROPPED THE CASE INTO THEIR **OPEN** FILE. IF CHARLIE COOKE WALKED IN AND **SURRENDERED** HIMSELF TO THE DESK SARGEANT, THEY'D **BOOK** HIM. OTHERWISE, HE WAS **FORGOTTEN**.



I FINISHED MY DRINK, WHICH COULD'VE PROPELLED A **VENUS PROBE**, THEN SLEPT AWHILE. EVENTUALLY, THE MANHATTAN SKYLINE APPEARED ON THE HORIZON, A SUPINE **GLAMOUR QUEEN** LYING NUDE ON A BED OF DARKNESS. HER FACE WAS WET WITH AUTUMN RAIN.

AS THE TRAIN EASED INTO PENN STATION TUNNEL, I WAS STILL WITHOUT A DEFINITE **TACTIC**.



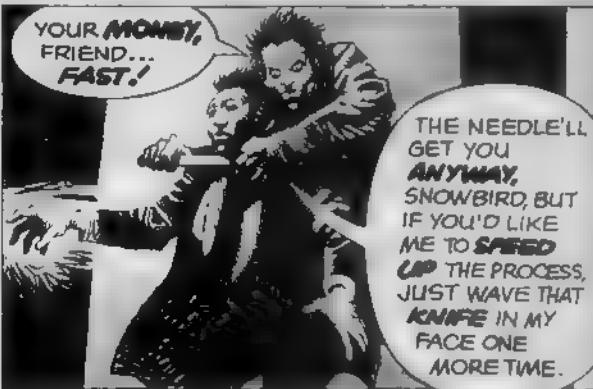
LEAVING THE TERMINAL, I WALKED ALONG 7TH AVENUE, TOWARD **TIMES SQUARE**. THE ORIGINAL CLUMP OF PEOPLE DISSOLVED, FILTERING OFF INTO TAXIS, SUBWAY STATIONS, AND HOT DOG STANDS. BY THE TIME I REACHED 52ND STREET, I WAS ALONE, ALMOST.



I PROBED THE DESPERATE, BLACK-PEARL EYES. THE PUPILS WERE THE SIZE OF **LINT-SPECKS**, FLICKERING LIKE A STROBE. HIS BONY FINGERS **TWITCHED** ON THE HANDLE OF HIS WEAPON....



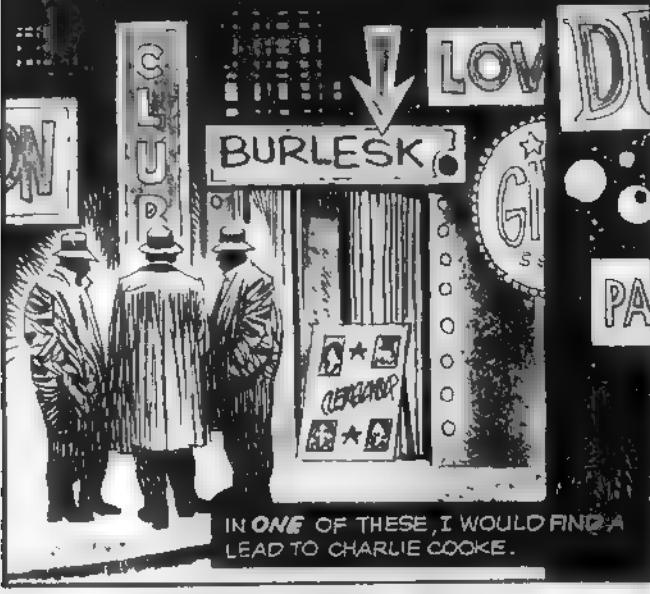
I COULD EASILY HAVE **DISARMED** HIM AND TURNED HIM IN. IF I HADN'T BEEN IN SUCH A **SOUR MOOD**, I PROBABLY WOULD HAVE.



INSTEAD, FOR **EXPEDIENCY'S** SAKE, I KICKED HIM IN THE GROIN, AND LEFT HIM WRITHING IN THE ALLEY.



IT'S A FUNNY THING ABOUT 42ND STREET. AT EYE LEVEL, YOU SEE ENOUGH **NEON** TO LIGHT UP THE **DARK AGES**, BUT IF YOU LOOK JUST **ABOVE** THE MOVIE MARQUEES, AND THE "SIX BEAUTIFUL GIRLS EVERY HOUR" SIGNS, YOU'LL SEE THE SAME FLAT, BANAL BUILDINGS THAT INSPIRED **URBAN RENEWAL**.



IN ONE OF THESE, I WOULD FIND A LEAD TO CHARLIE COOKE.

SOMEWHERE IN THE DISJOINTED PAGES OF HER DIARY, SUSIE MADE A PASSING REFERENCE TO A MAN NAMED SAKS. HE MADE THE KIND OF MOVIES THAT WERE CALLED **BLUE**, WHILE THEY PUT THEIR PRODUCERS IN THE **BLACK**.



SUSIE WORKED FOR HIM ONCE, BEFORE THE **ACID** CUT SHORT HER SCREEN CAREER.

NOW HE RAN A **PEEPSHOW** OPERATION, EXHIBITING HIS OWN PRODUCT. WORD HAD IT, HE STILL USED THE SNOWMAN TO PROCURE BODIES FOR HIS "EPICS".



SAKS?

YEAH.
YOU VICE SQUAD?

I'M LOOKING FOR THE SNOWMAN.

I SAW HIS HAND MOVE FURTIVELY TOWARD THE **ALARM** WHICH WOULD NO DOUBT SUMMON THE **REINFORCEMENTS**. I WONDERED WHY A MAN WHO MAKES A **BUFFALO** LOOK SMALL WOULD NEED HIRED MUSCLE.

I'M LOOKING FOR THE SNOWMAN.



AND I'M LOOKIN' FOR THE POT O' GOLD AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW NOW ARE YOU GONNA BUY SOMETHIN' OR JUST STAND THERE AND MAKE NOISE?

I WOULD TRY IT ONE MORE TIME.



WHAT'S THIS, CANONIC
CAMERA? NOW LISTEN - !

THE FINGERS INCHED SLOWLY, JUST SHY OF THE **ALARM**.



DAMNED IF HE DIDN'T ANSWER ME THAT TIME.

THERE'S NOTHING AMUSING ABOUT AN AMUSEMENT PARK AT MIDNIGHT... ESPECIALLY AN ABANDONED ONE. I STOOD IN THE CENTER OF THE MIDWAY, FEELING LIKE ALICE IN A NIGHTMARE-WONDERLAND.

I LISTENED AS NIGHT WINDS WHISTLED THROUGH THE CAROUSEL... AND BREATHED EERIE LIFE INTO ITS OLD CALLIOPE. I HEARD, TOO, THE CREAK OF THE FERRIS WHEEL SEATS AS THEY SWAYED IN THE BREEZE, AND THE RHYTHMIC POUNDING OF THE SURF ON THE NEARBY BEACH.

HERE, AMONG THE DESERTED ARTIFACTS OF Coney Island, I WOULD FIND THE SNOWMAN... IF SABO WAS TELLING THE TRUTH.

HIS STORY SEEMED PLAUSIBLE ENOUGH: IT SEEMS THAT AFTER HER AFFAIR WITH COOKE ENDED, MY SISTER LINKED UP WITH A SYNDICATE HIT MAN NAMED JACK ROY. AT FIRST HE PITIED HER DISFIGUREMENT.

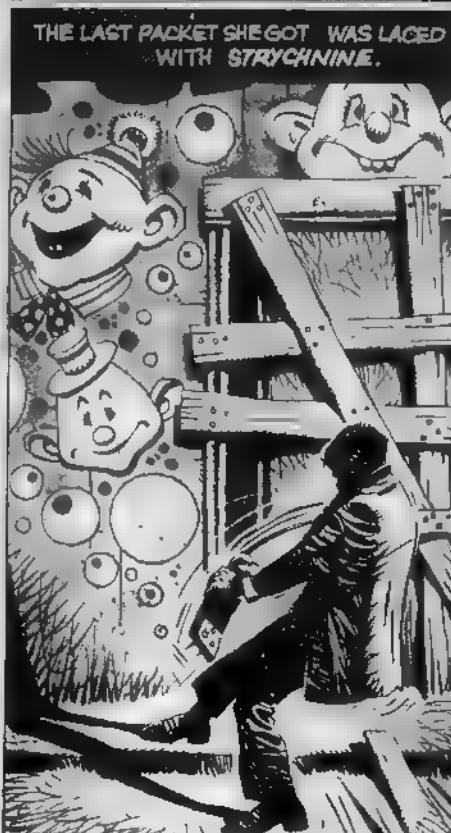
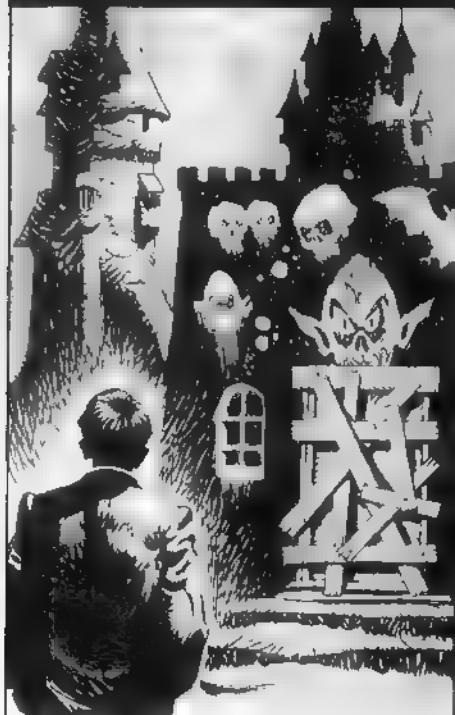
GRADUALLY THE PITY TURNED TO LOVE.

SUSIE'S ADDICTION UPSET HIM AND, MORE THAN ONCE, HE TRIED TO INDUCE HER TO KICK THE HABIT, BUT SHE NEVER COULD STAND THE TASTE OF COLD TURKEY.

THE LAST PACKET SHE GOT WAS LACED WITH STRYCHNINE.

ROY TOOK IT PRETTY HARD, AND WORD WENT AROUND IT WAS OPEN SEASON ON SNOWMEN, WHO DUE TO THEIR PECCULAR CONSTRUCTION, MELT UNDER INTENSE ANNE CHARLIE COOKE WENT UNDERGROUND.

HE'S ONLY CONTACT WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD, SINCE SUSIE'S DEATH, WAS EDGAR SAKS. IT WAS A DEAD CERTAINTY MY ARRIVAL WAS EXPECTED.



IF CHARLIE COOKE WAS HERE, HE WAS IN GOOD COMPANY. JACK THE RIPPER, BLUEBEARD, ALISTAIR ARCHAEOUS AND OTHER INFAMOUS KILLERS OF HISTORY MADE UP THE FIRST WAXWORKS EXHIBIT.



THE SNOWMAN WAS ESSENTIALLY IN THE SAME BUSINESS. ALL HE LACKED WAS THEIR STYLE.

I GROPED AND CLAWED THROUGH A LABYRINTH OF CORRIDORS AND WONDERED IF HELEN KELLER STARTED THIS WAY. FINALLY, I CAME UPON ANOTHER DISPLAY.



I HAD TO GIVE THE SCULPTOR CREDIT... THEY WERE SO LIFELIKE, I'D HAVE SWORN ONE OF THEM WAS BREATHING.



AS IT TURNED OUT, ALL OF THEM WERE BREATHING. I GRUNTED AN OBSCENITY AS KING KONG'S HAND CLAMPED LIKE A BEAR-TRAP OVER MY MOUTH. IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT THE GORILLA HAD KNOWN SOME PRETTY LEAN YEARS.

AFTER ALL, I WAS A FUGITIVE FROM PAY WRAP.

THEY TOOK ME TO WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN A SET FOR "THE PERILS OF PAULINE"... THE OLD SAW MILL WHERE THE VILLAIN PLANNED TO MAKE TWINS OF PEARL WHITE.



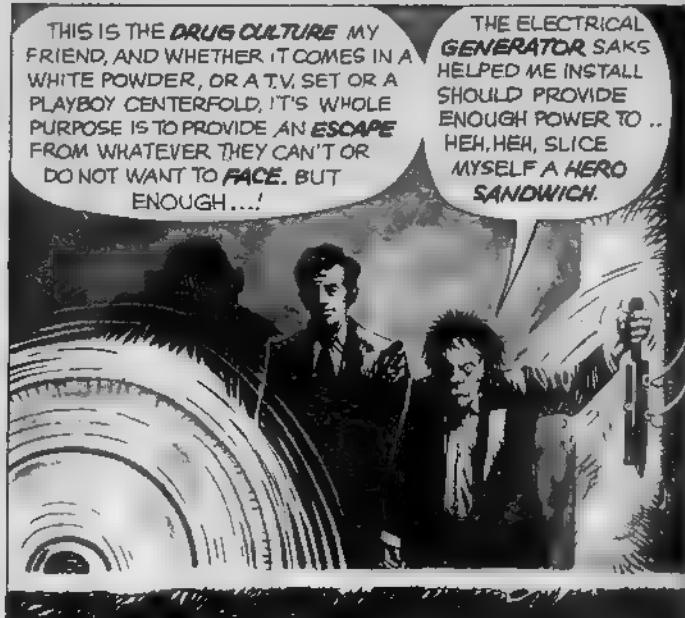
THE SNOWMAN MUST HAVE RECOGNIZED ME FROM A PHOTO IN SUSIE'S PURSE. WHEN HE SAW ME, HE SMILED LIKE A MOUSE IN A CHEESE FACTORY.



HOW REFRESHINGLY OLD-FASHIONED! A SELF-PROCLAIMED HERO. A MAN WHO ACTUALLY CARES ENOUGH ABOUT THE DEAD TO AVENGE THEM.

I'M SIMPLY HERE TO SATISFY MY OWN BLOODLUST. THAT MAKES ME NO BETTER THAN YOU, EXCEPT I'M A LITTLE MORE SELECTIVE ABOUT MY VICTIMS.





WHATEVER HE SAID NEXT WAS DROWNED OUT BY THE SHRILL DRONE OF A BUZZ SAW. KING KONG, AND THE WOLFMAN WHO LOOKED LIKE HIS YOUNGER BROTHER, CAME UP BEHIND ME.



I ALWAYS FIGURED MY ARMY TRAINING WOULD BE GOOD FOR SOMETHING, SOMEDAY, BESIDES ATTACKING YELLOW MUNCHKINS IN RICE FIELDS. I WAS RIGHT.



WHOEVER WAS INSIDE THE WEREWOLF COSTUME WAS DECIDEDLY HUMAN. I COULD TELL BY THE SCREAM, AND THE FLESH, BLOOD, AND FUR THAT SPRAYED THE ROOM WHEN HE HIT THE BUZZ SAW.

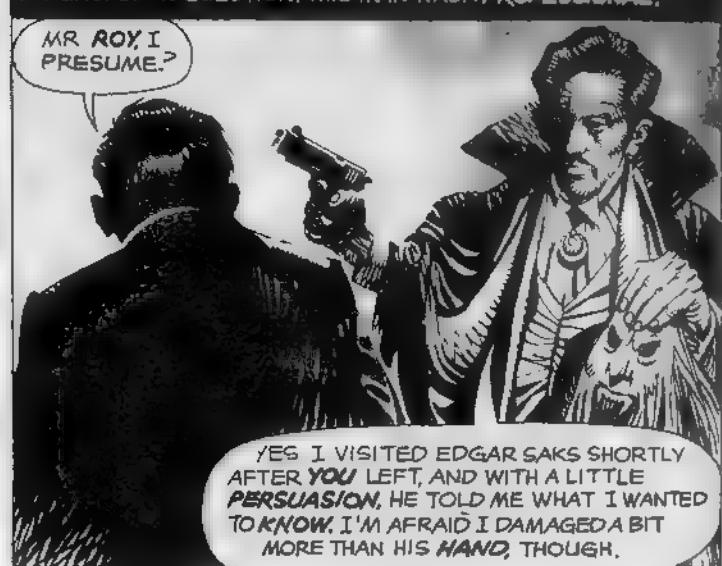
APPARENTLY THE OLD MACHINE WASN'T USED TO WORKING THAT HARD. THERE WAS A FLASH THAT MIGHT'VE RIVALLED A NINJA, THEN UTTER BLACKNESS. I FROZE, ESTIMATING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN ME AND THE SWAMPYLAND AROUND ME.

WHEN THE TIME CAME, I MANAGED TO BREAK KING KONG'S NECK WITH ONE SWAP.

I WAS ABOUT TO DO THE SAME TO THE FRANKENSTEIN MONSTER, WHEN SOMEBODY PUT A BULLET THROUGH HIS HEART.



AS HE TORE OFF HIS MASK, THE ICE-BULLET EYES ANSWERED MY UNSPOKEN QUESTION. THIS MAN WAS A PROFESSIONAL.



IN FACT,
HE IS AS DEAD
AS THAT
UNFORTUNATE
GENTLEMAN THE
SNOWMAN SENT
OUTSIDE TO REPORT
YOUR ARRIVAL
EARLIER. I CAME
UPON HIM FIRST AND
DECIDED HIS
COSTUME WOULD
BE USEFUL. IT
WAS.

SUSIE WAS REALLY
SOMETHIN' SPECIAL, WASN'T
SHE? I MEAN HAVING TWO MEN
WILLING TO KILL IN HER NAME...!

LIKE YOU SAID, WE'RE NOT CRUSADERS.
WE DON'T AVENGE OUT OF RIGHTEOUS-
NESS... WE DO IT BECAUSE WE'RE
VIOLENT MEN. BY KILLING SUSIE, HE
TOOK SOMETHING AWAY FROM US
THAT WE BOTH NEEDED....!

I NEVER WAS
MUCH GOOD AT CRYING,
SO KILLING IS THE ONLY
WAY I KNOW TO GET
THE PAIN OUT.

WE CAUGHT UP TO THE SNOWMAN IN THE HALL OF MIRRORS.
JACK ROY'S GUN ROARED LIKE A LION WITH A CACTUS UP ITS
BACKSIDE, AND WE WATCHED A THOUSAND CHARLIE COOKIES
FALL.

THE SNOWMAN DIDN'T WIMPER OR PLEAD OR ANYTHING
ELSE, AS JACK ROY TOOK THE SYRINGE OUT OF HIS
POCKET, NOR DID HE FLINCH AS THE NEEDLE WAS JABBED
BRUTALLY INTO HIS ARM.



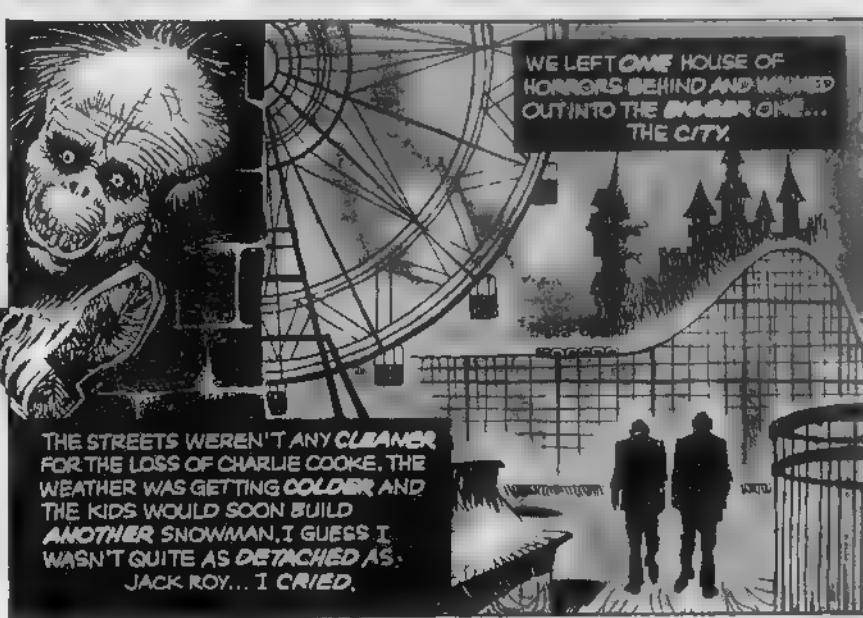
THE REVENGE WAS EVERYTHING WE'D
HOPED IT WOULD BE. THE SNOWMAN
SCREAMED AND CRIED AS THE DRUG
ATE THROUGH HIS SYSTEM. EVERYWHERE
HE TURNED WAS THE SAD, PAIN-WASHED
FACE OF ANOTHER ADDICT...



WE LEFT ONE HOUSE OF
HORRORS BEHIND AND WASHED
OUT INTO THE BIGGER ONE...
THE CITY.



...AND THEY ALL LOOKED LIKE HIM. BY THE
TIME IT KILLED HIM, WE HAD SEEN
CHARLIE COOKE DIE FIVE THOUSAND TIMES.



THE STREETS WEREN'T ANY CLEANER
FOR THE LOSS OF CHARLIE COOKE. THE
WEATHER WAS GETTING COLDER AND
THE KIDS WOULD SOON BUILD
ANOTHER SNOWMAN, I GUESS I
WASN'T QUITE AS DETACHED AS
JACK ROY... I CRIED.

END

THE PROFESSIONAL RECHECKED THE CONTENTS OF THE SLIM BLACK VALISE CAREFULLY, THEN SNAPPED SHUT THE METAL STUDS WITH A TIGHT SMILE.



HE TURNED TO THE OVAL MIRROR ABOVE HIS BUREAU AND DEEPENED THE TUCK ON HIS EXPENSIVE SILK TIE, FINGERS MOVING WITH PRACTICED EASE, EYES CAREFULLY SCRUTINIZING HIS NEATLY COMBED HAIR. HE PAUSED ONLY LONG ENOUGH TO FRESHEN THE STRONG MUSKY SCENT OF HIS AFTERSHAVE.



HE RAN A WHISK BROOM BRISKLY ACROSS HIS NEWLY PRESSSED SUIT, GRABBED THE HOUSE KEYS OFF THE COFFEE TABLE AND STEPPED INTO THE WARM SPRING SUN OF SANTA MIRIA, CALIFORNIA.



HE TOOK A DEEP BREATH. HE GRINNED. A ROBIN DIPPED LOW OVER THE SHAKE-SHINGLE ROOFS, PAST THE CAREFULLY PRUNED ROWS OF SHRUBBERY, ARROWING DOWN THE ALIBASTER LENGTH OF SIDEWALK BEFORE HIM. HIS SMILE WIDENED, SHOWING TWIN ROWS OF SPARKLING WHITE, PERFECTLY EVEN TEETH. IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL NEW DAY. IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL NEW NEIGHBORHOOD. IT WOULD BE A BEAUTIFUL NEW BEGINNING . . .

THE Professional



THE PROFESSIONAL WENT TO WORK . . .

THE FIRST
HOUSE ON HIS
LIST BELONGED
TO THE KETCHUMS.
IT WAS IN THE TWO
HUNDRED THOUSAND
DOLLAR RANGE.
THAT WAS GOOD.
MRS. KETCHUM WAS
ROUGHLY FORTY
- TWO YEARS OLD,
FAIRLY ATTRACTIVE,
NON-WORKING,
WITHOUT
CHILDREN. MR.
KETCHUM WORKED ALL
DAY. THAT WAS
GOOD TOO.



WELL... I'M
REALLY NOT
DRESSED!
PERHAPS
ANOTHER
TIME--

YES... M-M-M!
OUR FIRST REAL
SPRING DAY!
EVERYTHING IS SO...
SO FRESH AND
ALIVE!

WOULD YOU
JUST LOOK AT
THOSE CLOUDS?
CUMULONIMBUS.
MARVELOUS!
REMINDS YOU OF
THE SPRING DAYS
OF YOUR CHILD-
HOOD. DOESN'T
IT? AND SMELL
THAT AIR...

A TIME TO
BEGIN LIFE
ANEW!

WHY, YES,
I JUST PUT
ON A POT.
WOULD YOU
CARE FOR
A CUP, MR.
MR...

OH!... THAT WOULDN'T
BE FRESH COFFEE
WOULD IT? (SNIF-SNIF)
I HAVEN'T HAD A CUP IN
WEEKS -- ON THE
GO SO MUCH, YOU
UNDERSTAND. SMELLS
DELIGHTFUL....

...GRANT. PETER GRANT. I'D
LOVE A CUP THANK YOU MY!
THIS IS LOVELY! WHERE DID YOU
EVER FIND A DECENT INTERIOR
DECORATOR?

WHAT, THIS?
OH, I DID IT
MYSELF!

NO! BUT THIS
IS CHARMING!
YOU'RE A
PROFESSIONAL
THEN?



GOOD MORNING
MRS. KETCHUM.
LOVELY DAY ISN'T
IT? MY NAME IS
PETER GRANT...
I'M WITH REVEL
GROOMING. MAY I
HAVE A MOMENT
OF YOUR TIME?

MRS.
KETCHUM... I
REALIZE WE'VE ONLY
JUST MET... BUT I
WONDER IF YOU'D DO
AN ENORMOUS
FAVOR FOR ME? I
WONDER IF YOU'D
CONSIDER TAKING
DOWN YOUR
HAIR?

IT'S JUST THAT... YOU BEAR SUCH A **REMARKABLE RESEMBLANCE** TO SOMEONE I ONCE KNEW, FROM THIS PICTURE OF YOU. I WAS WONDERING IF... IN REAL LIFE...

WELL... IF IT'S **REALLY THAT IMPORTANT** TO YOU...!

IT WOULD MEAN **SO MUCH** TO ME.

WELL?

OH, MY LORD... IT'S... IT'S **INCREDIBLE**!

...NO, PLEASE... DON'T COME ANY NEARER!

WHY, MR. GRANT... WHAT IS IT?

MY... MY... WIFE, LORAINNE, KILLED LAST YEAR IN AN **AUTO ACCIDENT**, YOU'RE NEARLY HER TWIN! I. (SOB!). . .

OH MY! MR. GRANT, PLEASE DON'T... I DIDN'T REALIZE! YOU MUST HAVE BEEN **DEEPLY** IN LOVE...

SHE WAS MY **WHOLE** LIFE.

AND NOW... SEEING YOU HERE LIKE THIS... SO WARM, SO ALIVE... IT'S ALMOST LIKE... LIKE.

WOULD YOU MIND **VERY MUCH** IF I ASKED ONE LAST FAVOR? WOULD YOU MIND, MRS. KETCHUM, IF I KISSED YOU?

KISSED?... I... WELL, THAT IS... I--



MR. GRANT!... I DON'T THINK... WE SHOULDN'T BE...

JUST ONE MORE KISS! JUST ONE MORE! PLEASE... IT WOULD MEAN **SO MUCH** TO ME....!



I FEEL LIKE... LIKE I'M IN A DREAM! LIKE I'M EIGHTEEN AGAIN AND IT'S THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING AND YOU'RE A BOY I ONCE KNEW...

M-M-M! SMELL THAT AIR, PETER! GOD! HAVE YOU EVER FELT SO ABSOLUTELY YOUNG AND VITAL AND ALIVE? HAVE YOU EVER BEEN MORE IN LOVE WITH LIFE?

I HAVE TO GO.

GO? NOW? I THOUGHT PERHAPS WE COULD --

I HAVE TO GET TO WORK. I'LL BE BEHIND IN MY QUOTA....



MRS. FLETCHER WAS PRESIDENT OF THE SANTA MIRA GARDEN SOCIETY. SHE HAD A BON AWAY AT COLLEGE, A DALMATION NAMED ROGIEFORT, A HUSBAND THAT CHAIN-SMOKED AND A LARGE COLLECTION OF PORCELAIN FROGS. SHE HATED ALL FOUR.



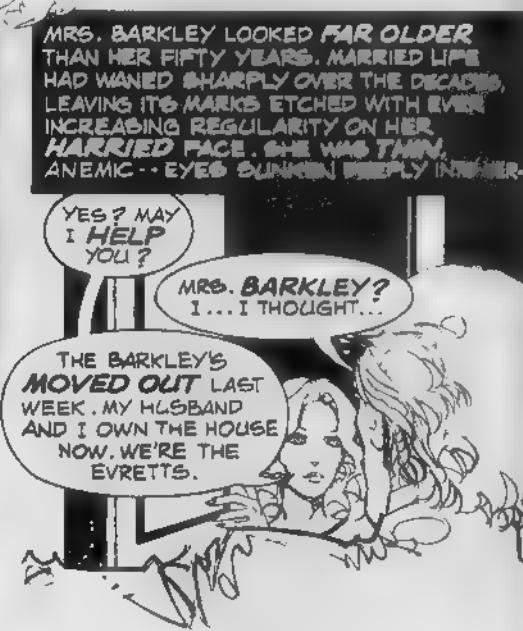
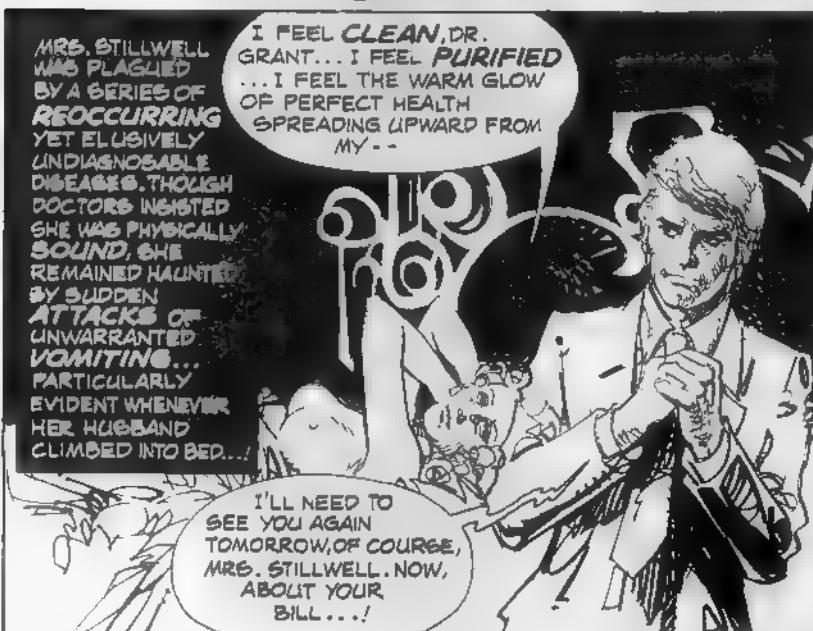
MRS. CORNWELL WAS A WIDOW. HER THIRD HUSBAND DIED ABRUPTLY, LEAVING HER WITH A TWENTY-THOUSAND DOLLAR INSURANCE POLICY. HER FOURTH HUSBAND DIED TRYING TO SPEND IT. MRS. CORNWELL RARELY LEFT HER EIGHT ROOM HOUSE NOW. SHE DIDN'T TRUST MEN. SHE DID, ON THE OTHER HAND, TRUST CATS....

TAISEY LIKES YOU, MR. GRANT. THAT'S RARE! AND TAISEY IS A FINE JUDGE OF CHARACTER!

MY LATE WIFE WAS QUITE FOND OF CATS, DID I MENTION?

AND MAY I SAY YOU REMIND ME VERY MUCH OF HER? IT'S NOT EVERYONE WHO CAN COMMUNICATE WITH CATS, YOU KNOW... REALLY COMMUNICATE....

OH, MR. GRANT, THAT'S SOTRE.



... AND MAY I SAY
YOU LOOK **VERY MUCH**
LIKE MY LATE WIFE ?

THAT'S VERY FLATTERING,
MR. GRANT, BUT I STILL DON'T
NEED ANY COSMETICS TODAY.
NOW, IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME,
I HAVE SOME IRONING TO DO.

IT HAPPENED OCCASSIONALLY, EVERY NEIGHBORHOOD HAD A FEW CUSTOMERS WHO DIDN'T SUCUMB, THOUGH NOT MANY WITH MRS. EVERETT'S LOOKS. BUT HE WAS MORE THAN SATISFIED WITH THE DAY. HE WAS WAY OVER QUOTA. THE PROFESSIONAL MOVED UP THE SIDEWALK TO HIS HOUSE.

HE LOCKED THE FRONT DOOR BEHIND HIM, THREW HIS COAT ON A CHAIR, LOOSENERED HIS TIE AND WENT DIRECTLY TO THE BASEMENT...

HE SWITCHED ON THE RED OVERHEAD LIGHT IN THE SMALL PANELED ROOM AND SNAPPED OPEN THE BLACK VALISE. HE REACHED INSIDE AND UNHOOKED THE TINY COMPACT CAMERA FROM ITS MOORINGS.



IN FIFTEEN MINUTES, ALL
THE NEGATIVES
WERE DEVELOPED.



BY SIX O'CLOCK ALL THE PRINTS WERE DRIED AND PLACED IN MANILA ENVELOPES.



BY SEVEN HE WAS RELAXING
WITH A MARTINI AND LISTENING TO
LINDA RONSTADT.

MRS. KETCHUM WAS THE FIRST TO BREAK...

I... I SIMPLY CAN'T AFFORD TO GIVE YOU ANY MORE, PETER. I HAVE ENJOYED OUR TIMES TOGETHER BUT... WELL, I THINK JOHN IS BEGINNING TO SUSPECT....!

SEE THAT HE DOESN'T.



YOU DISGUSTING, VILE, PERVERTED YOUNG --

I WANT ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS A DAY, VIVIAN.... YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO PILFER THAT FROM YOUR HUSBAND'S ACCOUNT WITHOUT HIM KNOWING IT.

MRS. FLETCHER WAS NEXT...

OH, MY GOD! WHAT AM I TO DO? WHAT AM I TO DO?
CUT DOWN ON CIGARETTES....



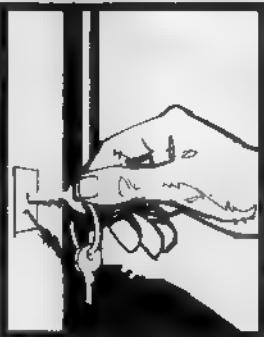
BY SEPTEMBER, HE'D GOTTEN RID OF THE CAMARO AND BOUGHT AN ALPHA ROMERO. HE WAS STILL LOOKING FOR A NEW HOUSE BUT THAT WAS BECOMING LESS OF A PROBLEM; THE FLETCHER'S, IT SEEMED, HAD DECIDED ABRUPTLY TO MOVE TO FLORIDA.



A PRESENT FOR YOU, MR. GRANT, FROM THE WIVES OF SANTA MIRA. IT CONTAINS THE ASHES OF ALL THE PHOTOS YOU'VE TAKEN IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD AS WELL AS THEIR NEGATIVES. YOU REALLY SHOULD KEEP YOUR DARK ROOM LOCKED, YOU KNOW.

HOW DID YOU GET IN?

HE'D PREDICTED IT. MRS. FLETCHER WAS NOT A STRONG WOMAN. WHEN YOU CAME RIGHT DOWN TO IT NO WOMAN WAS REALLY STRONG. WOMEN IN GENERAL WERE SHEEP...WEAK AS A BUNCH OF --



WE'VE BEEN WAITING TO GIVE YOU SOMETHING.

AH, MR. GRANT, I'M MRS. EVERETT...REMEMBER? AND YOU KNOW THESE LADIES.

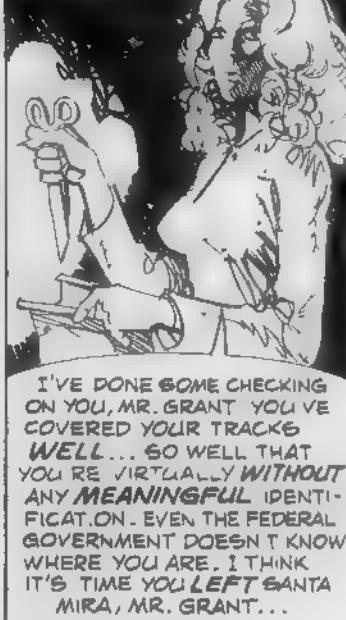


WE GOT IN. AND WE'RE ON TO YOU, MR. GRANT--ALL OF US. VIVION CONFIDED IN ME ONE DAY. IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO DISCOVER YOUR SORDID LITTLE GAME.

I THINK IT'S TIME YOU LEFT SANTA MIRA, MR. GRANT



...CAN STILL MAKE PHONE CALLS... STILL TELL YOUR HUSBANDS...

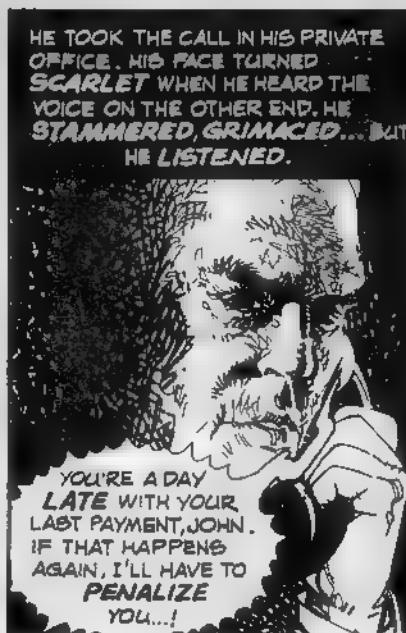


I'VE DONE SOME CHECKING ON YOU, MR. GRANT. YOU'VE COVERED YOUR TRACKS WELL... SO WELL THAT YOU'RE VIRTUALLY WITHOUT ANY MEANINGFUL IDENTIFICATION. EVEN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DOESN'T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE. I THINK IT'S TIME YOU LEFT SANTA MIRA, MR. GRANT...



...PERMANENTLY!





THE LAST MAN SYNDROME

HE STOOD **ALONE** IN THE HEART OF THE CITY. A HEART THAT **SHOULD** HAVE THROBBED WITH THE PASSAGE OF **HUMANS** AND **MACHINES** ALONG THE **VEINS** AND **ARTERIES** OF THE SPRAWLING METROPOLIS.

BUT THERE WAS **NOTHING**. NO **_SOUND**. NO **MOVEMENT**. NO **LIFE**.

THERE WAS **ONLY HIM**, AND THE **EMPTY SILENCE**, THE UNNATURAL, OPPRESSIVE SILENCE THAT HAD BEEN HIS **ONLY COMPANION** FOR... **HOW LONG** HAD IT BEEN NOW?... HE COULD NOT **REMEMBER**. BUT THEN, THERE WAS **ONE** HE COULDN'T **REMEMBER**.

AND SO HE STOOD ALONE, LOST, AND SOARED AS NEVER!

LIKE SPOTLESS, STERILE **TOMBSTONES**, BUILDINGS ROSE AROUND HIM, STRETCHING HIGH INTO A CLEAR BLUE SKY. FRIENDLESS, IMPERSONAL **MONUMENTS OF ANOTHER PLACE** AND **TIME**, CATCHING AND REFLECTING THE SUN'S HOT SMOOTHERING RAYS...

... AND CARRYING HIS DESPERATE **SHOUT** FAR INTO TWISTING CANYONS OF CONCRETE, STEEL, AND GLASS WITHOUT **REPLY**.

MOCKING HIM WITH A THOUSAND REVERBERATING **ECHOES** OF HIS OWN FEAR CRACKED VOICE. BUT EVENTUALLY, EVEN THE ECHOES DIE...

... AND HE WAS ALONE IN THE SILENCE **ONCE MORE**.



AND SO HE **WALKED**. HIS SHOES SCUFFED HOLLOWLY AGAINST SMOKING ASPHALT AND HIS BREATH WAS HARSH AND RASPBED IN HIS EARS...



...AND WALKING, HE REMEMBERED THAT ALL HE COULD **REMEMBER** WAS **WALKINS**.

TIME, AND THE SEEMINGLY ENDLESS CITY, PASSED SLOWLY. HE ACHED... HIS MIND A SWIRLING MAELSTROM OF UNANSWERED, AND UNANSWERABLE, QUESTIONS.

ALONE. A GODDAMNED COSMIC JOKE. IT HAD TO BE. AND HE WAS THE FALL GUY...



HE PAUSED, LOOKING AT THE UNFAMILIAR SUNBURNED REFLECTION OF HIS FACE IN THE SHINING SURFACE OF A STORE FRONT WINDOW.

WHO WAS HE? HE TRIED TO THINK, BUT HIS FACE WAS THE UNRECOGNIZABLE FACE OF A STRANGER. MOTHER IN HEAVEN... WHAT WAS HAPPENING TO HIM?



...AND STILL, HE WAS ALONE...



...EXCEPT...



GOD HOW HE **RAN**... RAN FOR ALL HE WAS WORTH. THE STIFLING, SUN BAKED AIR BURNED A HOT PATH TO HIS LUNGS AND HIS SWEAT DRENCHED CLOTHING STUCK WETLY TO HIM LIKE A SECOND SKIN.

BUT HE RAN, AND IT SEEMS TO TAKE HIM HOURS TO CROSS THE STREET. HIS LEGS **TREMBLED**...

TELEPHONE



...A WIND BLOWN **NEWSPAPER**. A CLUE, PERHAPS, TO WHERE HE WAS. TO WHAT HAD HAPPENED. AGAIN HE RAN, CHASING ANSWERS...

...CHASING THE WIND WITH GROWING **MADNESS** IN HIS RED-RIMMED EYES.



WEARY, HE STUMBBLED, **FELL**. THE PAVEMENT RUSHED HARD AND FAST TO MEET HIM WITH BONE NUMBING PAIN!

BREATHLESS, HE TRIED TO RISE, IMPOSSIBLE!



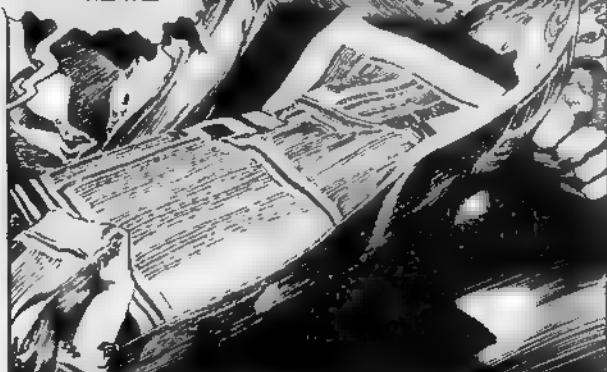
AND THE PAPER?



SCRAMBLING, LEAPING, TEARING TENDER FLESH FROM KNEES AND ELBOWS. HE MADE ONE LAST, DESPERATE GRAB AT SANITY.



DEAR GODINHEAVEN...



NOTHING.

DEAD, DEAD AS THE CITY, SILENT AS A CRYPT.

HE MURMURED, PLEASED. SOMEONE, ANYONE. PLEASE. HE SHOUTED... CURSED.

AND THEN HE **SAW IT**...



NO! DAMN YOU, NO!

GIBBERISH. THE WORDS... IF THEY WERE WORDS... SWAM CRAZILY BEFORE HIS EYES, NO ANSWERS, NO MEANING.



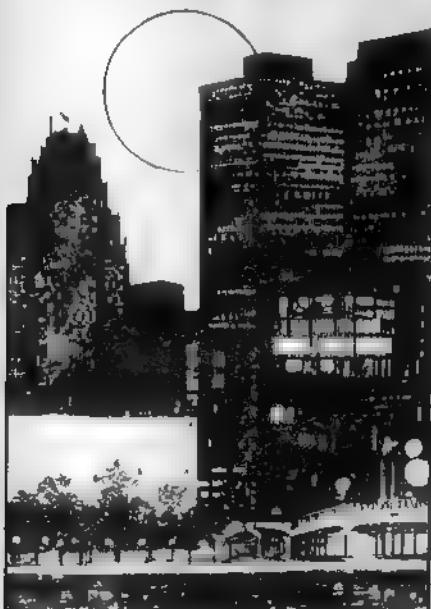
...SO HE RETURNED THE NEWSPAPER...



...INTO THE UNCARING WIND...



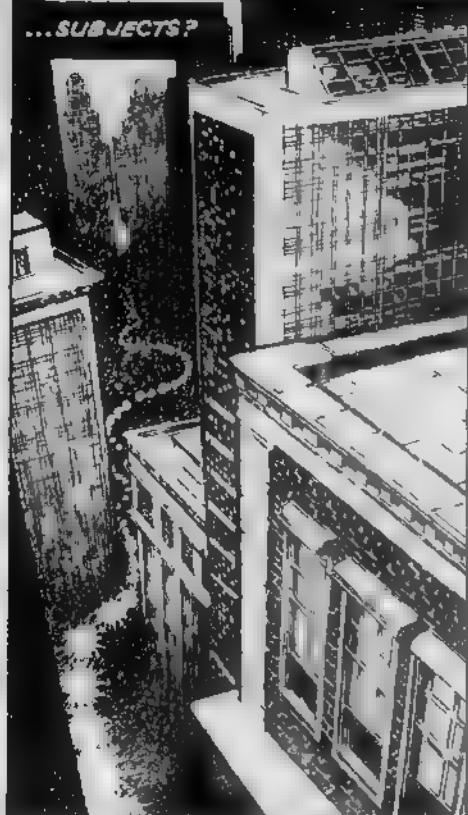
SHADOWS LENGTHENED, STALKED SILENTLY ACROSS A SILENT CITY. LIGHTS BLINKED ON IN THE EMPTY SKYSCRAPERS AND THE TENEMENTS AND THE TWO STORY BRICK HOMES IN THE SUBURBS IN A MACABRE RESEMBLANCE OF LIFE...



...BUT HE REMAINED A NAMELESS ENTITY IN A NAMELESS, GOD FORSAKEN WORLD REPRESENTING A MAJORITY OF ONE, THE KING OF THE WORLD.



...SUBJECTS?



HIS MOUTH WAS DRY AND HE COULD HEAR HIS HEART POUNDING IN HIS EARS. TORCH LIGHT. FOOTSTEPS. PEOPLE, COMING THIS WAY.

HE WANTED TO RUN... SHOUT TO THEM. EMBRACE THEM. TALK TO THEM. GOD, IT HAD BEEN SO LONG. BUT INSTEAD HE MERELY WATCHED...



...AS SHADOWY, DARK ROBED FIGURES PASSED HIM BY WITHOUT A WORD... WITHOUT A WHISPER!

A MIRAGE. A DREAM. LIKE THE TELEPHONE. AND THE NEWSPAPER. AND THE LIGHTS. HE WAS NUMB. BUT ANY COMPANY... EVEN IF ONLY IN HIS MIND... WAS BETTER THAN NONE. SO HE QUIETLY WATCHED THE PSYCHOPATHIC PARADE...



...AND THEIR UNWILLING CAPTIVE.

PLEASE!
DON'T DO THIS...
PLEASE!



THEY TIED HER ROUGHLY TO A CRUDE WOODEN STAKE...THAT WASN'T THERE A MINUTE AGO...IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET. HE ALMOST LAUGHED AT THE ABSURDITY OF THE SITUATION...



...AS THEY PILED MORE WOOD...DRY, BRITTLE KINDLING...HIGH AROUND HER LEGS. HE HEARD HER SOB HYSTERICALLY...



...AND THEN SHE SPOKE...

JASON!
HELP ME--!



HIS NAME! SHE MUST KNOW HIM! AND EVEN AS TORCH IGNITED WOOD HE WAS RUNNING TOWARD HER, BRANDISHING... HIS SWORD?



STOP!



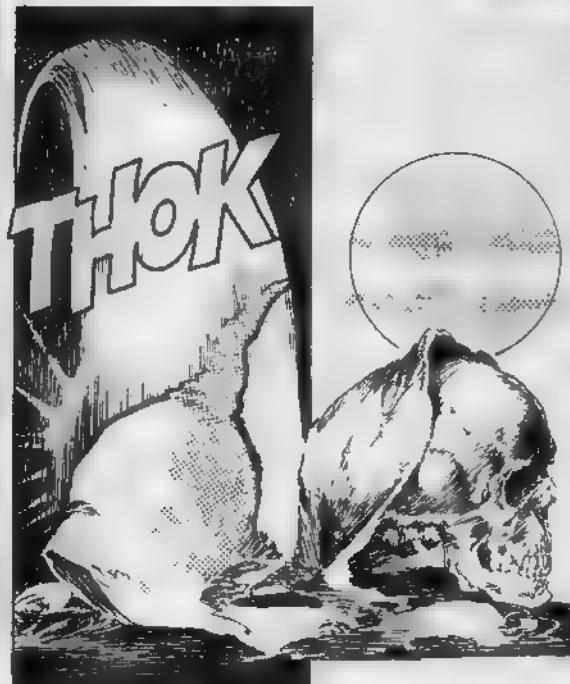
WHEN THE ROBED FIGURES TURNED PONDEROUSLY TO BLOCK HIS PATH...



CHOK



THOK



HAHAHAHAHAHA!



HE SHUDDERED, SUDDENLY SICK, AND LEPT QUICKLY PAST THE ROBED HORRORS.

FLAMES LICKED AT HIS CLOTHING. HE HEARD HIS HAIR SINGE, CRACKLING LIKE THE DEAD WHITE BONES OF THE SKELETON-GHOULS BEHIND HIM.



JASON. SHE CALLED HIM JASON. AND HE HAD TO KNOW WHY. SO MANY QUESTIONS TO ASK...



...BUT FIRST...

THIS WAY... HURRY!



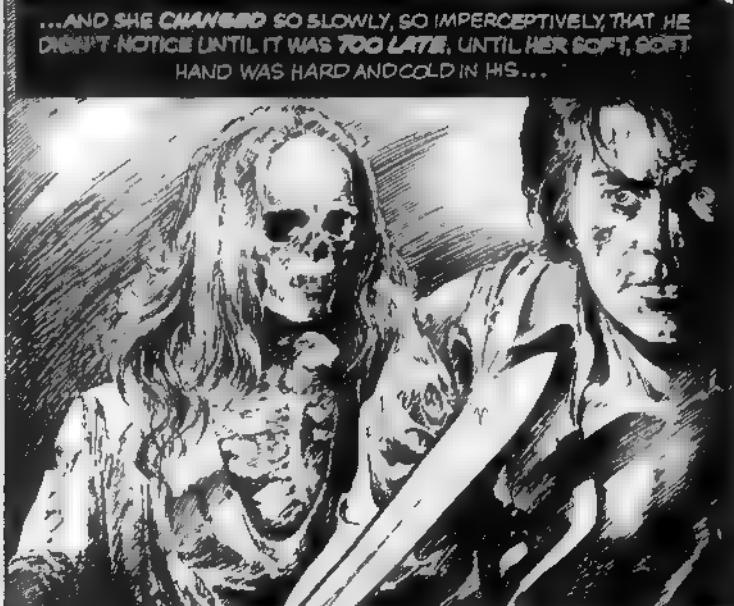
...ESCAPE! IF HE COULD ESCAPE THIS MADNESS...!

HER HAND WAS SOFT IN HIS AND HER BREATH WAS WARM AND COMFORTING ON THE BACK OF HIS NECK...

REAL. SHE'S REAL!



...AND SHE CHANGED SO SLOWLY, SO IMPERCEPTIVELY, THAT HE DIDN'T NOTICE UNTIL IT WAS TOO LATE, UNTIL HER SOFT, SOFT HAND WAS HARD AND COLD IN HIS...



...UNTIL HER BREATH WHISTLED SUDDENLY ICY DOWN HIS BACK...

HIS UNPROTECTED BACK.



IT REACHED OUT WITH BONEY, TALON-LIKE HANDS. HE GASPED, CHOKING...



...AND THE LAST THING HE SAW BEFORE HIS ACHING LUNGS BURST WITHIN HIS CHEST WAS THE CALLOUS FACE OF... DEATH!

THE NIGHT BECAME BLACKER AND HE FELL...



...A VICTIM OF THE PRESSURE, PERHAPS. OR, MAYBE OF THE TIMES. CERTAINLY OF THE CONDITION. THE HUMAN CONDITION.

PSYCHOLOGISTS HAD EVEN GIVEN IT A NAME.

THE LAST MAN SYNDROME.

...IT ISN'T A COMMON DISORDER...



...OF MINDS LIKE HIS THAT COULD NO LONGER STAND THE STRESS OF A WORLD GROWN MUCH TOO COLD... TOO HOSTILE...

COLD!



WELL, HE HAD HIS PRIVACY NOW. HE DIDN'T EVEN FEEL THE MILLIONS OF PASSING FEET THAT RELENTLESSLY TRAMPLED HIS LIFELESS BODY. HE COULDN'T HEAR THE NUMBLING, ANGRY VOICES CURSING HIM BECAUSE HE HAD ROTTEN IN THERE.

...WORKING AWAY ON. HE MISSED...!



PROLOGUE

JACKIE PAPER WAS AN ADVENTURER, A SWORDSMAN, AN ARROWER, A PRINCE AND A HERO. HIS FATHER WAS KING, WEALTHY BEYOND MEASURE. HIS TUTORS WERE THE BRAVEST KNIGHTS IN HIS FATHER'S COURT. HIS FRIENDS WERE THE CHILDREN OF NOBLE MEN AND GENTLE WOMEN.



JACKIE PAPER WAS NO DIFFERENT FROM ANY CHILD SEEKING THE WARMING COMFORTS OF FANTASY TO ESCAPE THE COLD INDIFFERENCE OF REALITY. HE WAS A DREAMER.



JACKIE NEEDED HIS DREAMS. THEY WERE HIS WHITE STALLION. HIS ESCAPE FROM POVERTY, HUNGER, AND HIS FATHER'S HARD BOOT.



JACKIE KNEW THERE WAS LITTLE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HIS FATHER AND HIM. WHERE JACKIE FLED INTO MIND-NUMBING FANTASY, HIS FATHER HID FROM THE WORLD WITHIN A STUPEFYING FLASK OF CHEAP GROG.



JACKIE REALIZED THAT SOMEDAY, HE TOO WOULD HAVE TO DON THAT CYNICALLY HARSH MANTLE OF MANHOOD. HIS DREAMS WOULD DRIFT INTO THE NOTHINGNESS FROM WHENCE THEY CAME... AND HIS LIFE WOULD FOLLOW THE SAME PATH OF DRUDGERY HIS FATHER'S HAD TAKEN.

AND HE, TOO, WOULD TURN TO DROWNING HIS TROUBLES IN AN ALCOHOLIC STUPOR.



BLURRR...RD!

YET, JACKIE UNDERSTOOD THAT HIS LIFE WAS HIS OWN. OVER YONDER HILL AWAITED HIS KINGDOM. HIS PRINCESS. HIS LIFE AS AN ADVENTURER AND A HERO. WHILE AWARE... WITH HIS FATHER... HE HAD ONLY A LIFE OF ANXIETY AND HARSHNESS LEERING AT HIM.



JACKIE AND THE LEPRECHAUN KING

JACKIE HAD LIVED THROUGH **EIGHT HOT, DEAD, HUNGRY SUMMERS** WHEN HE DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO STRIKE OUT AND SEEK HIS FORTUNE.

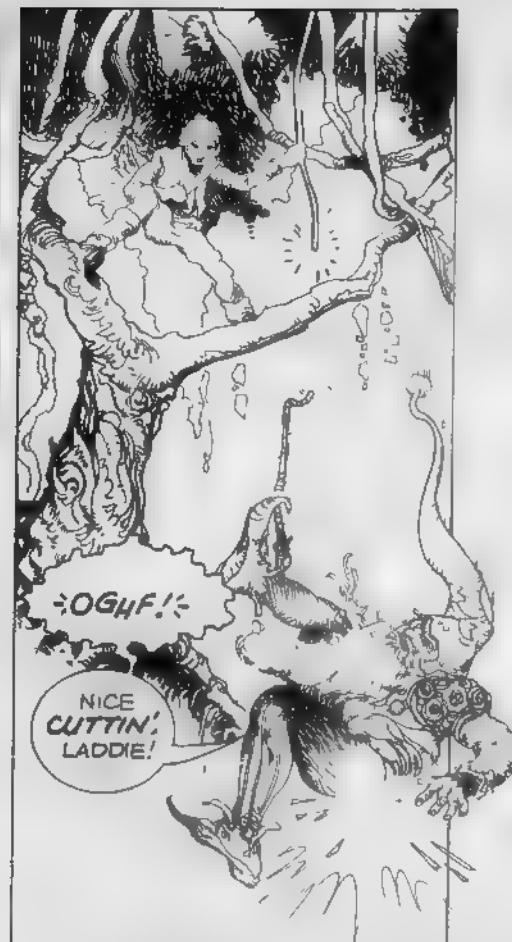


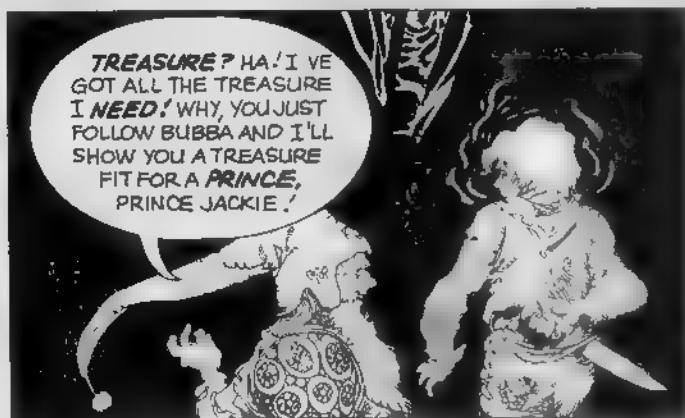
HE HAD NO IDEA WHAT AWAITED HIM OVER THE NEXT HILL. HE KNEW ONLY THAT **WHATEVER** LURKED THERE, HE WOULD GREET IT WITH WELCOMING ARMS AND A HEARTY SMILE. FOR JACKIE KNEW... EVEN IF **DEATH** AWAITED HIM, IT WOULD BE A MORE PLEASANT FATE THAN THAT WHICH HE HAD LEFT BEHIND.

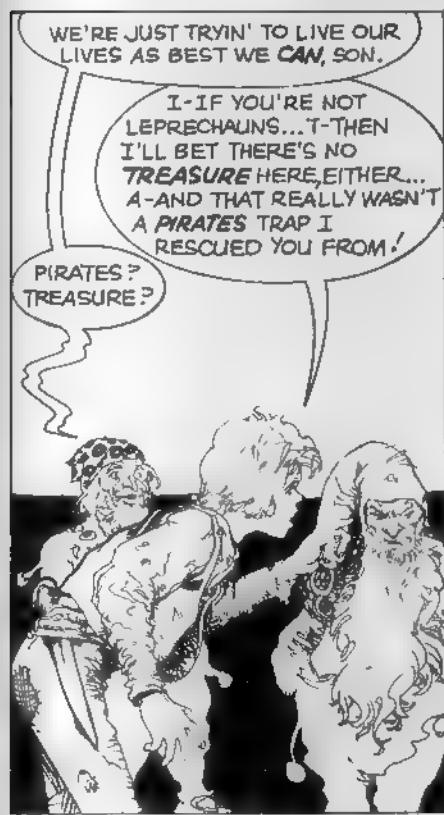
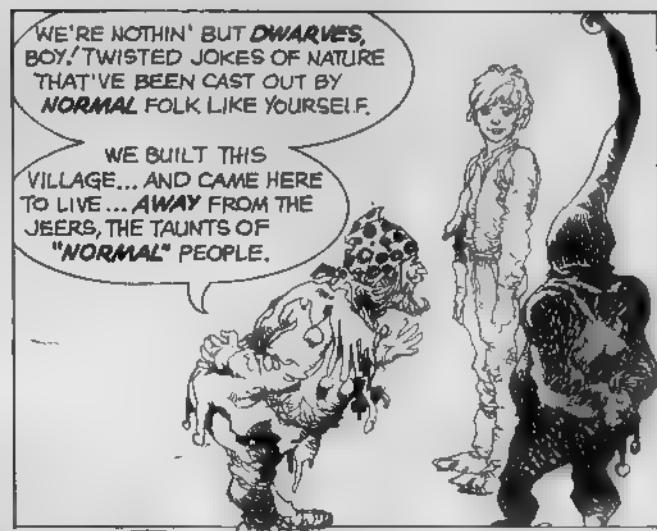
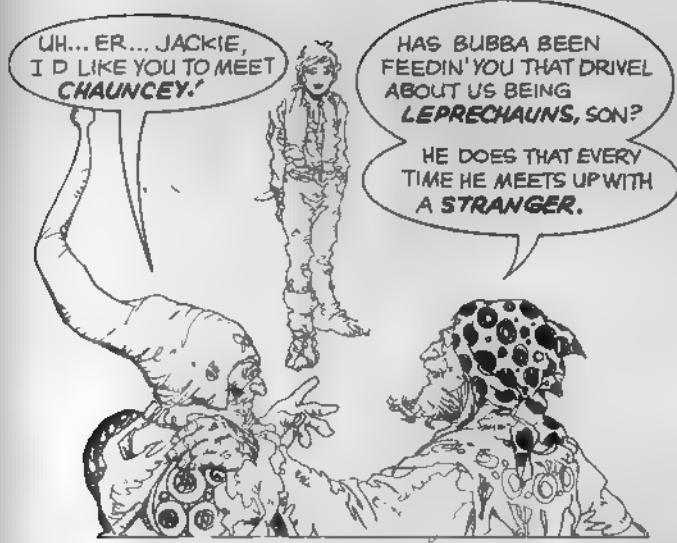


JACKIE FOUND HIS FATE... AND ADVENTURE ON THE VERY FIRST DAY OF HIS NEW LIFE.









WITH EIGHT LONG SUMMERS UNDER HIS BELT,
JACKIE SETTLED INTO HIS NEW LIFE WITH BUBBA,
CHAUNCEY AND THE OTHER DWARVES.



LEPRECHAUN KING OR FRAUD, JACKIE SOON DISCOVERED THAT BUBBA COULD BE ANYTHING HE DESIRED. JACKIE LEARNED, TOO, THAT HE HAD THE SAME MAGICAL POWERS OF IMAGINATION. AND TOGETHER, HE AND BUBBA SHARED THE HAPPIEST OF TIMES... BATTLING PIRATES FIGHTING RAIDERS, AND LEADING THEIR ARMIES INTO WAR WITH THE MAGICAL DRAGON, FLUFF.



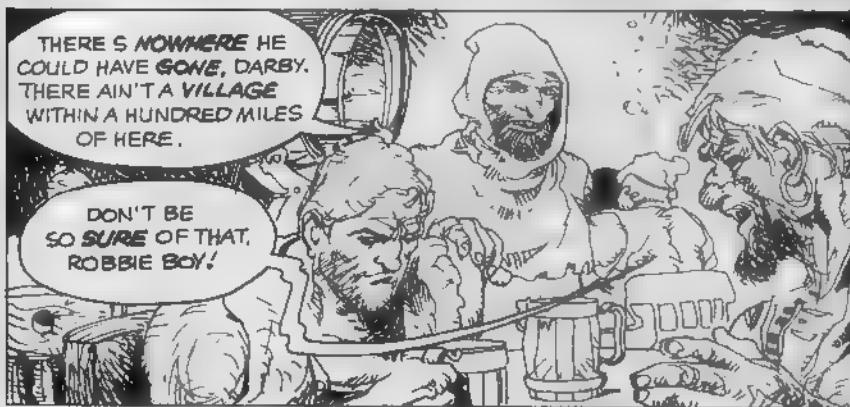
WHILE BACK IN THE VILLAGE, JACKIE'S FATHER GREW OLDER UNDER THE STRAIN OF DREARY DAILY TOIL... COUPLED WITH THE WORRY OVER HIS LOST, LOVED SON.



IT'S BEEN WEEKS,
ROBBY! WHERE COULD
HE BE? WHAT COULD HAVE
HAPPENED TO MY BOY?



H-HE'S ALL I HAVE!
S-SINCE HIS MOTHER
DIED... IT AIN'T BEEN
EASY FOR US, AND
NOW...
... NOW...
WHO COULD
HAVE STOLEN HIM
FROM ME?



THERE'S NOWHERE HE
COULD HAVE GONE, DARBY.
THERE AIN'T A VILLAGE
WITHIN A HUNDRED MILES
OF HERE.

DON'T BE
SO SURE OF THAT,
ROBBIE BOY!



I'VE HEARD HUNTERS
TALK OF AN UNHOLY
VILLAGE NESTLED AWAY
IN THE MOUNTAINS
YONDER.

THERE'S RUMORS
IT'S A VILLAGE OF THE
DAMNED, INHABITED BY
DEVILS: NIGHTSTALKING
CREATURES!

IF YOUR JACKIE'S NOWHERE TO BE FOUND IN THIS VILLAGE, DARBY, IT'S A GOOD BET HE'S IN THE STEWPOT OF THOSE OGRES.

NOOO!
WE'VE GOT TO
SAVE HIM! YOU'VE
GOT TO HELP ME
GET HIM OUT OF
THERE!

CALM YOURSELF, DARBY!
WE DON'T KNOW FOR SURE
JACKIE'S IN THE HANDS OF
DEVILS. WE DON'T EVEN KNOW
IF THERE ARE ANY DEVILS...
LET ALONE A VILLAGE
OF THEM!

I FOR
ONE, AM GOING TO
FIND OUT! AND IF
THERE'S A MAN
AMONG YOU, HE'LL
BE COMING
WITH ME!

JACKIE'S LIFE IN HARMONY WAS A GOOD ONE. SOMETIMES, HE WOULD HELP THE DWARVES IN THEIR FIELDS. YET, WHEN THE SUN WAS ITS BRIGHTEST, HE AND BUBBA COULD BE FOUND IN THE FORESTS... RISKING THEIR LIVES IN SEARCH OF PIRATES' TREASURE.

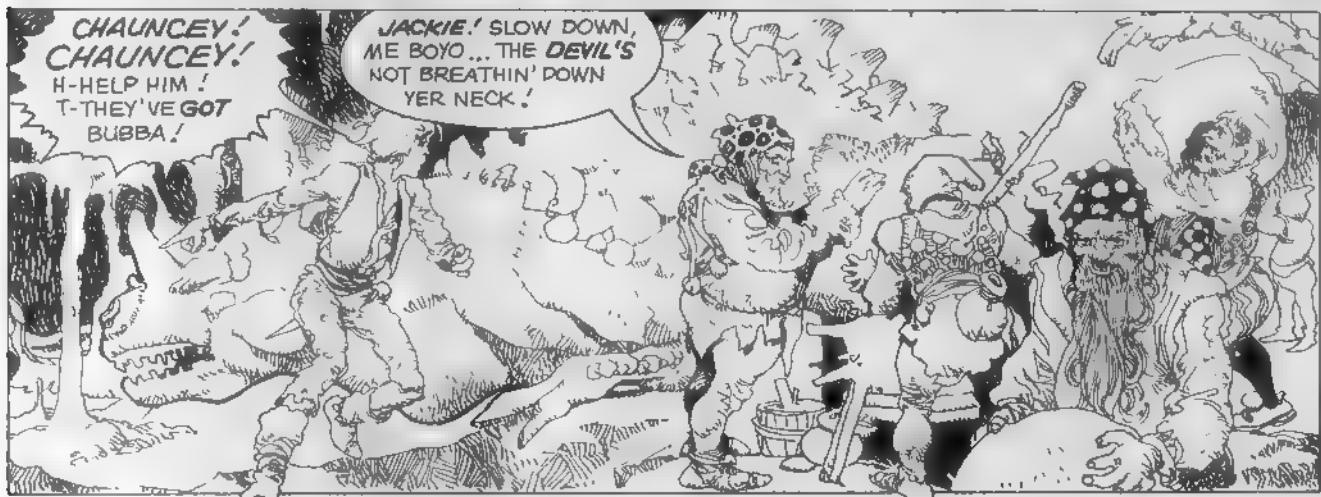


IT WAS ON JUST SUCH ONE OF THESE EXCURSIONS THAT BUBBA STUMBLED UPON THE BLOODTHIRSTY BAND OF CUTTHROAT PIRATES!



DOWN, BOY! IT'S BLACKBEARD HIMSELF... COME TO STEAL THE LEGENDARY LEPRECHAUN TREASURE!





IT'S PIRATES! THEY...
THEY'VE GOT BUBBA!
THEY'RE KILLING HIM!
WE...WE'VE GOT TO
SAVE HIM!

PIRATES?! HO, BOY!
THERE ARE NO
PIRATES THIS FAR
INLAND!

IT'S ALL YOUR
IMAGININGS... ALL A
GAME BUBBA IS HAVING
YOU BELIEVE.

NO! IT'S TRUE!
I SWEAR! THE PIRATES
ARE COMING... THEY'VE
GOT BUBBA AND
THEY'RE COMING
HERE!

COME, BOY... WE'VE
GOT NO TIME FOR
NONSENSE. WE'VE WORK
TO FINISH. LEAVE
US--!

NO!
THEY'VE FOUND
US!



ARROWS SLICED THE AIR WITH THEIR DEADLY SHRIEK.
BLADES CUT THE SHIRL SCREAMING SILENCE IN
MOANS OF DEATH. AND THE BLOOD OF THE HARMLESS
PEACELOVING "DEMONS" PAINTED THE EARTH
CRIMSON... THE EARTH THEY HAD LOVED... DESPICTED
... AND COME TO CALL THEIR OWN.

AND THROUGH IT ALL, TWO SILENT, TEAR-FILLED EYES
COULD ONLY WATCH THE HORROR... AND WISH... AND
HOPE FOR THE MIRACLE THAT WAS SO DESPERATELY
NEEDED.



A MIRACLE OF **SURVIVAL!**

A MIRACLE OF LIFE.

A-A DRAGON!

**LORD! SAVE US
FROM THE DEVILS
MAGICKS!**



KILL THEM, FLUFF! DESTROY
THE CUTTHROAT PIRATES!



BUT EVEN MIRACLES CAN BE HALTED... DESTROYED BY SOMETHING FAR MORE TANGIBLE... REALITY!



S-SAVED ME...?

SON!

SON EVERYTHING
WILL BE ALL RIGHT
FROM NOW ON!

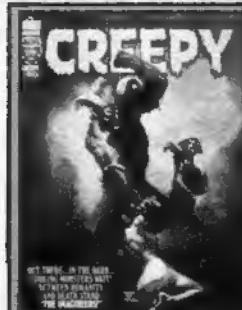
THERE WAS A TIME... WHEN DREAMS
WERE ALL HE HAD. THERE WAS A TIME
WHEN JACKIE PAPER WAS A
DREAMER, AND THE WORLD WAS
ILLED WITH SUNSHINE, LOVE AND
THE WONDEROUS SMELL OF BLOSSOMS.

BUT THE DAY JACKIE BECAME A **MAN**
THE WORLD OF IMAGINATION AND
ADVENTURE WAS **LOST** TO HIM FOREVER

TO BILL DU BOY

AND IT WAS A PITY, FOR EVEN IN
IMAGINATION, THERE WERE
BEAUTIFUL REALITIES.

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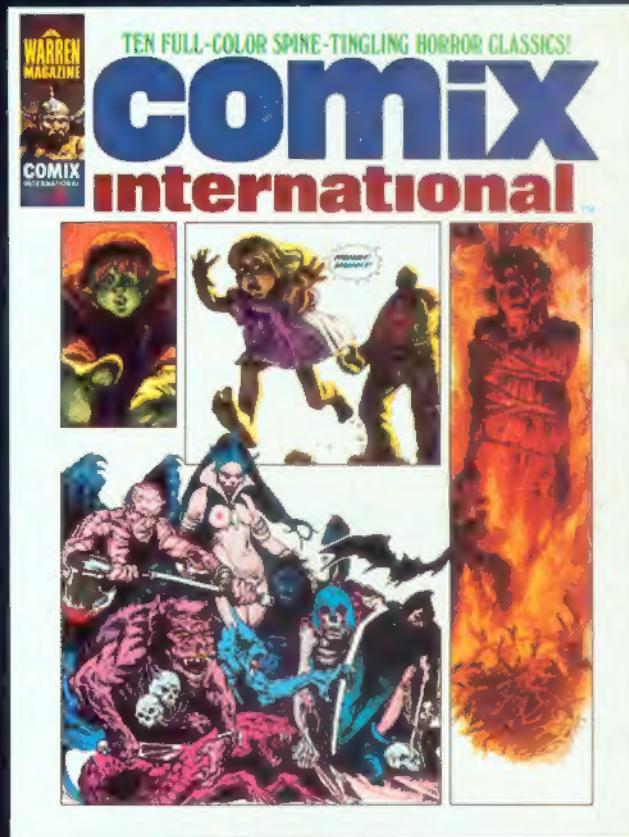
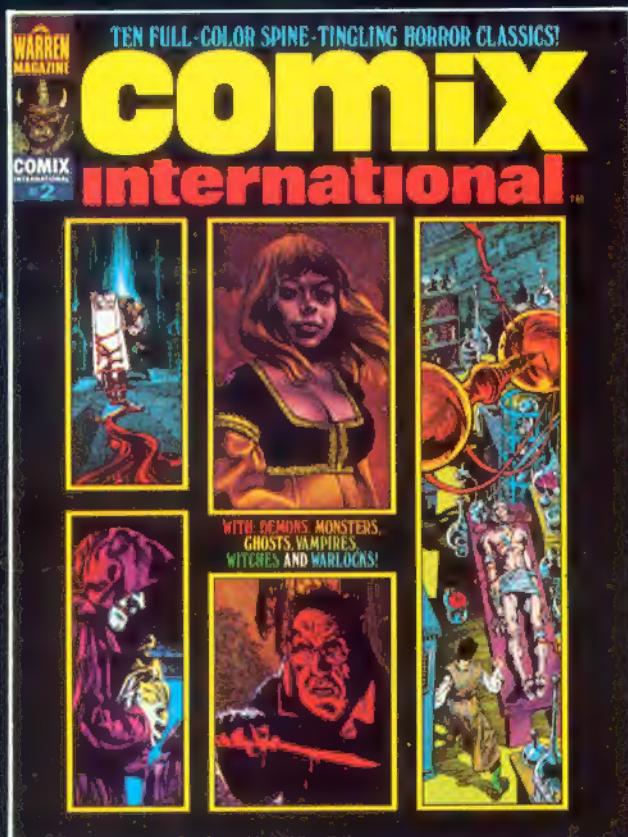
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